

ANALYSIS OF RURAL SERVICES NETWORK CALL FOR EVIDENCE

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING: WHAT DO RURAL COMMUNITIES THINK?

Main findings

This note reports the findings of a survey conducted among rural communities who are in membership of the Rural Services Network. There were 371 survey responses, most of which came from local (parish and town) councils.

Seventy-one per cent of them considered the proposals for introducing statutory neighbourhood planning (in the Localism Act 2011) to be either very or fairly useful. Whilst all groups were broadly positive, responses from the larger rural communities were most likely to be so.

Two-thirds of the responses thought it would be important for their area to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan in future. Yet even more saw it as important for their area to engage in traditional ways with the planning system – commenting on the principal authority's draft Local Plan and on individual planning applications.

Overwhelmingly, what they liked about the neighbourhood planning proposals is that they give local people more opportunity to have a say in planning matters and the way that their area develops. Many feel there is less chance that developments will simply be imposed on them.

There were a variety of dislikes with the neighbourhood planning proposals, but those most often mentioned were the expected cost and workload. This was a particular concern for smaller local councils. Another common theme came from those who don't believe anything much will change or that power really will devolve.

A majority of responses agreed neighbourhood planning would give more power to local councils and communities, make it easier to meet local needs and help to bring about the right sort of local development. Larger rural communities were more likely to think the proposals don't go far enough, whilst smaller rural communities were more likely to have concerns about handling the proposals as they stand.

Designating local green space for protection was the thing most respondents would like to do (87%). However, over two-thirds also wanted to lay down design criteria for future development and designate sites for affordable housing. Designating sites for employment use and community facilities was more popular with larger communities.

The survey indicates considerable interest in rural communities for neighbourhood planning, albeit tempered with reservations which policy makers should address.

December 2011

Introduction

This note reports the findings from a call for evidence (or survey), which was conducted in November 2011 among the 'Community Group' membership of the Rural Services Network (RSN). This group includes a large number of local (parish and town) councils from across rural England.

The survey sought their views about statutory neighbourhood planning, as being introduced by the Government, not least to gauge how likely it is that the measures will be taken up in rural areas and what sort of things they will be used for.

The survey was designed, analysed and written up by Brian Wilson Associates, with the RSN distributing the survey to its Community Group members.

Context and purpose

The Localism Act 2011, which has just become law, introduces statutory neighbourhood planning in England. This is intended to give communities more of a say in the development of their local area, albeit within certain limits and parameters.

It will enable communities to draw up a Neighbourhood Plan (NP) for their area. This might identify the new homes or other development that is needed and where it can take place, what design criteria any future developments should meet or where a community wishes to protect a valued local area of green space. The NP must be in conformity with the principal authority's Local Plan, with national planning policy and with certain European Directives. Once approved, the NP is incorporated into the Local Plan and is the basis for planning decisions in the area it covers.

In addition, communities can gain a Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO), which allows them to grant permission for a specific site or type of development. A formally constituted community organisation would similarly be able to gain a Community Right to Build Order, giving them the right to grant planning permission for specific type of development on a specific site. There also appears to be another mechanism for protecting local green space; communities can ask their principal authority to make the designation when they make or update their Local Plan.

Before any of these measures can be applied they must be checked by an independent examiner (to ensure they fit with planning rules) and will have to gain majority support from people voting in a local referendum.

Where local (parish and town) councils exist and there is a wish to pursue neighbourhood planning, it is they who must lead the process. Elsewhere, local residents can establish a Neighbourhood Forum and apply to their principal authority for that to be designated as the lead body¹.

¹ Anyone wishing to read more about neighbourhood planning can find information at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/introductionneighbourplanning>

There are various reasons for thinking that neighbourhood planning could be of particular interest to rural communities. For a start, unlike large urban centres, rural areas are mainly parished and have an established organisation in their local council. Second, around half of rural communities have previously undertaken some form of parish planning or community-led planning, so will have a broad familiarity with the concept. Third, evidence shows that rural communities are more likely to say they feel distant from decision-making processes, so they may be more inclined to seize the localism opportunity. Similarly, surveys show rural communities having more sense of place and local pride than their urban counterparts, which could make them more willing to come together to shape their area.

On the other hand, many parish councils are small, with limited budgets and time available, so they may struggle to lead neighbourhood planning unless they can secure external support and resources. One of the criticisms levelled at proposals for neighbourhood planning was their complexity, including requirements for consultation, a Sustainable Environment Impact Assessment and local referenda.

This short survey was undertaken so the RSN can better understand how neighbourhood planning might develop in rural England – just how useful do rural communities think the new measures will be, what do they like and dislike about them, and what are they likely to do with them? Neighbourhood planning has certainly sparked much debate and it is hoped the findings are of interest to central Government departments, local planning authorities and a range of other organisations.

The survey

The survey was run online, with responses coming in between 11th and 30th November 2011. When the survey commenced Government proposals for statutory neighbourhood planning were still that – proposals – although they gained legal status soon after. The survey form was kept short in order to encourage responses and it contained mainly closed questions to simplify the analysis.

It was targeted at the 'Community Group' membership of the RSN. Much the largest sub-group within this membership is the local (parish and town) councils and the bulk of survey responses have come from them. Others include rural schools, voluntary sector groups and local business groups. In all cases they are located within predominantly rural local authority areas² in England.

The survey elicited a total of 371 responses, with a good geographical spread. Moreover, it covered a good mix of rural community sizes. Forty-five per cent came from communities with fewer than 1,000 residents, 33% from communities with between 1,000 and 2,999 residents, 18% per cent from communities with between 3,000 and 9,999 residents, and a final 4% from communities with 10,000 or more residents. In all, this represents a healthy

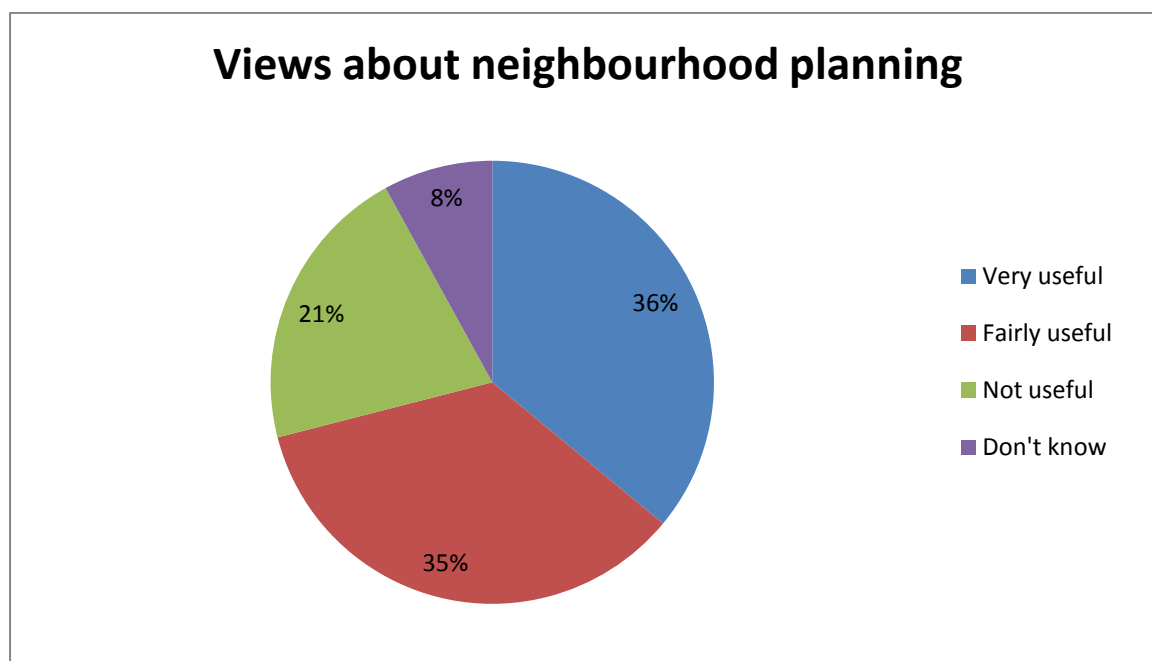
² Predominantly rural areas are defined by Defra as having at least half their population living in settlements with 10,000 or fewer residents.

level of response to the survey and a good sample from across the RSN Community Group membership.

Nonetheless, two cautionary notes are added. First, despite best attempts, it is possible those more interested in neighbourhood planning were more willing to complete the survey. The evidence for this is limited, however. For example, the proportion responding from areas with an existing parish plan or community-led plan was only slightly higher than might typically be expected. Second, by definition an online survey excludes the minority of local councils or groups who do not yet have an e-mail address. Together, these factors may generate results showing a slightly above average interest in neighbourhood planning.

Usefulness of neighbourhood planning

The survey asked respondents how useful the proposals³ for neighbourhood planning were likely to be for communities like their own. Responses to this question were largely positive, with 71% saying the proposals were either very or fairly useful. As the chart shows, the groups replying very useful and fairly useful were of roughly equal size.



The table below shows that responses to this question varied in one (arguably) predictable ways. Those from the larger communities, with 3,000 or more residents, were most likely to see neighbourhood planning as useful. Those from the smallest communities, with fewer than 1,000 residents, were least likely to see neighbourhood planning as useful. Larger local councils will typically have greater resources and capacity available to them, with which to lead the neighbourhood planning process. That said, even amongst the smallest rural communities, a sizeable majority (65%) considered it to be either very or fairly useful.

³ When the survey was distributed they were still proposals, with the Localism Bill going through Parliament.

How useful do you think neighbourhood planning will be for communities like yours?

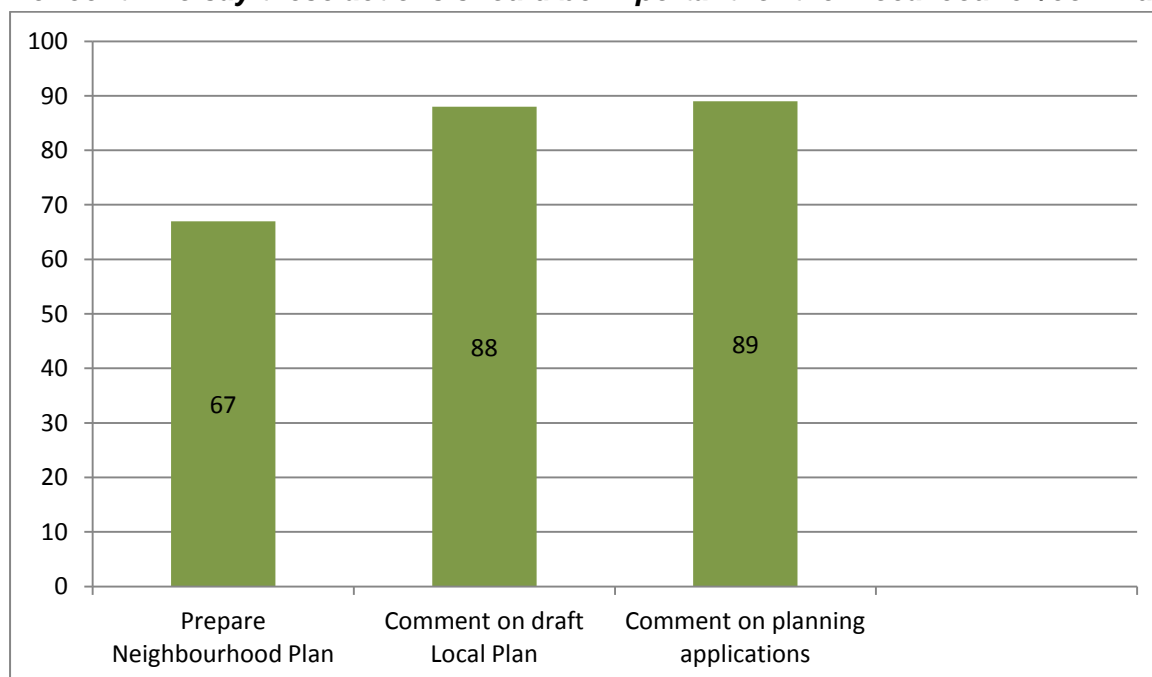
	All respondents	Only smallest communities	Only larger communities	Only areas with a parish plan ⁴
Very useful	36%	29%	51%	38%
Fairly useful	35%	36%	30%	35%
Not useful	21%	28%	13%	18%
Don't know	8%	7%	6%	10%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

Columns of figures may not add exactly to 100% as a result of rounding.

The final column in the table indicates there is actually very little evidence that those areas with existing experience of community-led planning (places with a parish or town plan or similar) are more likely to adopt neighbourhood planning. This could be because some fail to see any additional benefit, given they already have a community-led plan. A number of those responding to the survey commented to that effect.

Survey respondents were also asked how important it was that, in future, their local council or community prepared a Neighbourhood Plan for their area. Exactly two-thirds (67%) felt it would be important to do so. Although this is a very clear majority, it is notable that rural communities rank more traditional forms of engagement with the planning process higher still. This could be seen as a realistic assessment; since Neighbourhood Plans must be in conformity with Local Plans, then influencing those Local Plans remains pivotal.

Per cent who say these actions should be important for their local council/community



⁴ This is shorthand for all areas which have an existing Parish Plan, Town Plan or some other form of Community-Led Plan.

Of course, views may not translate into actions and it cannot be concluded from this that two-thirds of rural communities will undertake neighbourhood planning. Nonetheless, it is a positive finding.

Likes and dislikes with neighbourhood planning

Likes: in an open question, respondents were asked what they most liked or saw as most useful about the neighbourhood planning proposals. Overwhelmingly, the response was that it created more opportunity for local people to have a say in decisions about and the future of their area. Around half of respondents referred to this in one way or another. Quite a few mentioned the importance of local knowledge being given more weight. The flipside of this was that some felt pleased there would be less chance in future of development being 'imposed' on them from outside by the local planning authority or others⁵.

"It allows local people to have more of a say in the development of their neighbourhood."

"It means having more control and decision making that's relevant to the local situation."

"In theory it will put the power to make decisions ... in the hands of people living in that area."

Some responses were more specific. Quite a few commented on being able to steer the design or type of development which will take place in their area. Others were particularly positive about gaining powers to allocate sites for development and having more of a say about where in their town or village building should take place. The opportunity to plan for more affordable housing was cited by some, as was being able to designate local areas of green space for protection.

Another fairly popular response came from those who felt the proposals would allow them to use neighbourhood planning to pre-empt new development proposals in their area and to control unwanted development.

Although rather fewer in number, there were some interesting responses from those who considered that neighbourhood planning would variously: encourage their community to engage more with the planning system; give the community a better understanding of trade-offs between competing needs; bring the community together around an agreed plan; and (through better partnership working) speed up the planning process.

It should finally be noted that over 10% of respondents said they could not think of anything to like about the proposals.

Dislikes: survey respondents were then asked what they most disliked about the proposals or saw as most likely to be an issue. Views about dislikes were more diverse than those about likes, though cost and workload appear to be the top concerns.

⁵ Some respondents may misunderstand the position, as development planned for in principal authority Local Plans cannot be stopped by a Neighbourhood Plan. However, its exact location or design could be informed.

The cost of undertaking neighbourhood planning was the issue most often mentioned by respondents. Many cited their very modest local council budgets and some did not think they could realistically raise their Council Tax precept. There were frequent questions about where the funding would come from and, in particular, who would be paying for referenda.

The extra workload for local councils and communities was what worried many, especially where they saw neighbourhood planning as a bureaucratic or complex process. A number of local councils underlined that they have an already stretched part-time Clerk and rely on the goodwill of unpaid local Councillors. Some emphasised that each new initiative or project falls on the same small group of volunteers.

From some respondents there was a sense of disbelief that anything will actually change. The view among this group was that local planning authorities will still hold the upper hand and will find ways to stop communities doing things which they don't support. A few cited the need for neighbourhood plans to be in conformity with their authority's Local Plan, which they felt would be used as a control mechanism.

"For small communities the huge cost of producing a Neighbourhood Plan ensures it will never be done."

"It is ... time consuming for a small community like ours, which is already stretched when it comes to finding volunteers."

"We worry that parish councils will still not be listened to and the planning department will simply override their views."

Around a tenth of responses were concerned that neighbourhood planning would result in undue weight being given to active local groups or individuals pursuing particular interests, which may not be representative of the wider community. Indeed, some feared a risk from vested interests or those with a conflict of interest. Others mentioned local lobbying by those with a NIMBY mindset. A related issue came from those who worry neighbourhood planning will split their community, with groups of residents adopting opposing stances.

There were then those whose concern was that local councils and communities will come under pressure from developers, wanting them to designate development sites. Conversely, a few thought local landowners would render any attempts by the community to encourage development meaningless.

Quite a number disliked the fact that neighbourhood planning only enables communities to encourage more development or shape planned development in their area; it doesn't allow them to reduce planned development. Some cited broader issues about changes being made to the planning system, such as the introduction of a presumption in favour of sustainable development and a perceived weakening of countryside protection.

A few respondents could find nothing to dislike about the neighbourhood planning proposals.

What will change as a result of neighbourhood planning

Survey respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about neighbourhood planning. As the table below shows, the responses were again rather positive. Almost two-thirds agreed that it gives more powers to local councils and communities. Most also agreed that it made it easier to meet local people's needs and to bring about the right sort of local development. Answers about the other statements were more evenly split, although they do not indicate widespread concern that neighbourhood planning will be either too complex to be worthwhile or too limiting in its powers.

There are some telling differences in the answers received from communities of different population sizes. Compared with the overall picture, larger rural communities (with 3,000 or more residents) were:

- More likely to agree it offers too limited powers to local councils and communities;
- More likely to agree that improved joint working with principal authorities will result;
- Less likely to agree neighbourhood planning is too complex to be worth undertaking.

Per cent of respondents who agree or disagree that neighbourhood planning will:

	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Don't know
Give more powers to local councils and communities	65	13	14	9
Make it easier to meet the needs of local people	55	20	17	8
Help to bring about the right sort of local development	51	15	20	14
Improve working between local councils and principal authorities	33	24	27	16
Offer too limited powers to local councils and communities	28	27	22	23
Be too complex to be worthwhile undertaking	27	24	30	19

Rows of figures may not add exactly to 100% due to rounding.

The converse was also true. Compared with the overall picture, the smallest rural communities (with fewer than 1,000 residents) were:

- More likely to agree neighbourhood planning is too complex to be worth undertaking;
- Less likely to agree it offers too limited powers to local councils and communities;
- Less likely to agree that improved joint working with principal authorities will result.

Indeed, larger rural communities are almost three times as likely as smaller communities to view neighbourhood planning powers as too limited. Smaller communities are more than twice as likely as larger rural communities to see them as too complex to be worthwhile.

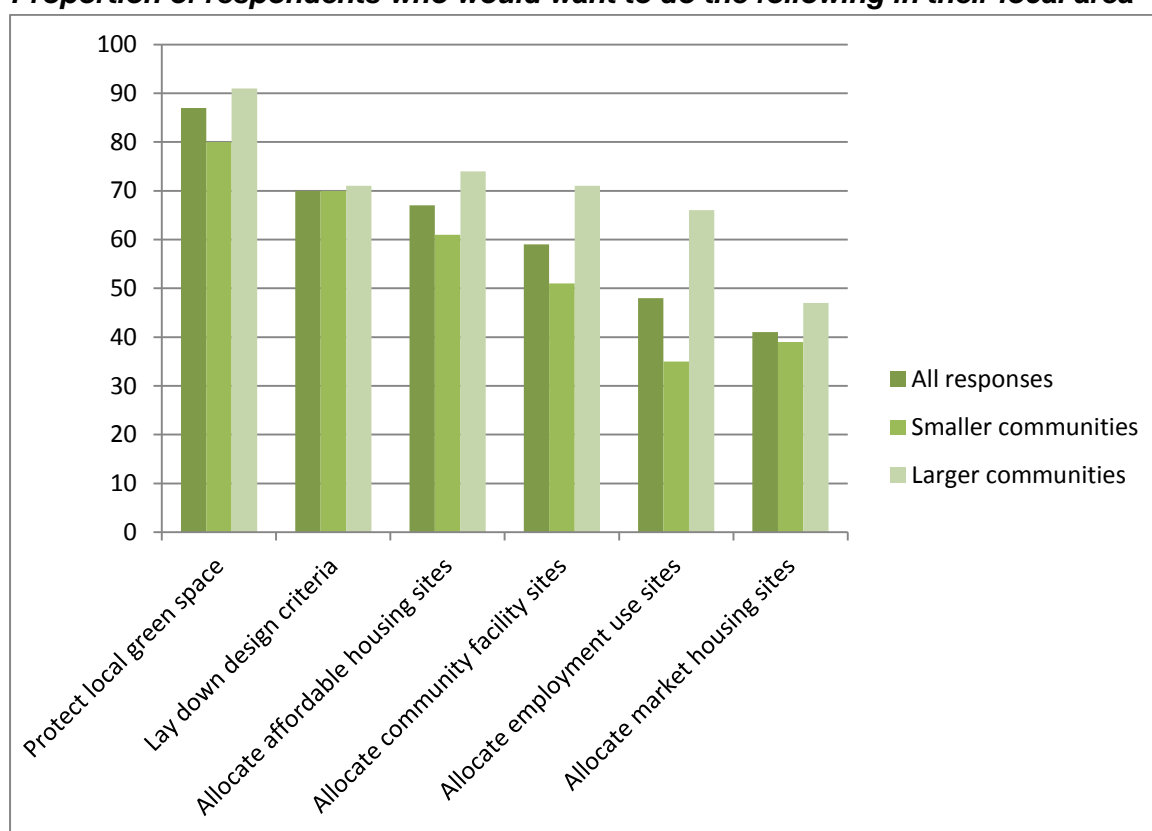
This could be characterised as saying that many representing larger communities don't think the neighbourhood planning proposals go far enough, whilst many from smaller communities are concerned about their area's capacity to handle the proposals as they stand.

How neighbourhood planning will be used

Survey respondents were asked whether they would want to do certain things in their local area (things which could be seen as typical neighbourhood planning activities). Whatever their views about neighbourhood planning, 342 ticked one of more of the six activities listed⁶.

Amongst them the most popular activity (ticked by 87%) would be designating valued local areas for retention as green space. Other activities which scored highly were laying down design criteria for any future development (70%) and designating sites for affordable housing (67%). All of the activities asked about attracted a fair degree of interest. Even the least popular one – designating sites for market housing – was ticked by 41% of respondents.

Proportion of respondents who would want to do the following in their local area



Again, there is a pattern to the responses from larger and smaller rural communities. The larger communities (3,000 or more residents) had an above average interest in five of the six activities. Their interest in designating sites for both employment uses and community facilities was well above the average. The smaller communities (fewer than 1,000 residents) had a below average interest in five of the six activities. Their interest in designating sites for employment uses was well below the average.

⁶ The remaining 29 may not wish to do any of these activities or may have skipped the question for other reasons.

Further issues

There were three further issues which attracted comment in the survey responses and which are worthwhile highlighting.

Existing community-led plans: quite a few responses commented that they had already invested time and effort in producing a Parish Plan, Town Plan or Village Design Statement. They did not wish to duplicate that exercise and many hoped they could build upon what they had, rather than starting neighbourhood planning from scratch. This seems very reasonable, especially if the existing community-led plan is up-to-date. At the very least there may be ways they could simplify and speed up the neighbourhood planning process. It would seem useful to have examples of this piloted and documented, with the lessons learnt for others. Indeed, since community-led plans cover a wider range of issues than planning concerns, there is no reason why communities should not continue to produce both (as linked documents).

Wider involvement in the planning process: some local councils and communities would like to see the advent of neighbourhood planning used as a prompt to develop a better working relationship with their local planning authority. This could include improved (and perhaps earlier) consultation arrangements with the community tier when Local Plans are being developed and when planning applications are being considered. Some survey respondents would value this every bit as much as the new neighbourhood planning opportunities.

Transition to the new planning system: a number of local councils and communities said they do not see the point in undertaking neighbourhood planning until their principal authority has an up-to-date Local Plan in place. This is because there is no Local Plan for it to be in conformity with and/or they fear that a subsequently produced Local Plan could be at odds with their neighbourhood plan. These are understandable reactions. The Department for Communities & Local Government could usefully provide guidance to clarify the status of neighbourhood plans in situations such as these.

Concluding comments

Overall, this survey has identified a considerable degree of interest in the neighbourhood planning proposals among the local councils and others who responded from RSN member rural communities. More than two-thirds recognised some value in those proposals and almost as many considered it important that a Neighbourhood Plan be prepared for their area in future. To that extent, the proposals have clearly tapped into a sense of feeling distant from decision making and powerlessness. In principle, at least, many rural communities appear keen to try something which they view as giving people more of a say in the planning process and thus in shaping their local area.

None of which is to say that communities are uncritical of neighbourhood planning. They expressed a range of concerns, not the least of which were the potential costs and workload that will be involved. Government has recently indicated that further funding will be made

available, beyond that already allocated to the Neighbourhood Planning 'frontrunner' or pilot areas⁷. Given the typical (small) size of local council budgets and the severe pressures on principal authority budgets, this would certainly appear to be needed. In the words of one response, "*the scheme's good intentions will not be realised unless additional resources are made available to local councils.*"

Unsurprisingly, it is the smaller rural communities, where budgets, people resources and capacity are generally scarcer, which are less likely to engage in neighbourhood planning activity and which hold more reservations about it. That is not to say that they were negative about neighbourhood planning; most still rated it as useful. There may, however, be a case for support organisations targeting a good proportion of their assistance for neighbourhood planning towards smaller communities with resource constraints. It should not be forgotten that the widespread adoption of community-led planning in rural areas happened with considerable support⁸. It may also be that some useful models of neighbourhood planning can be tried, with smaller parish councils working as a geographic cluster or sharing resources.

The findings about what communities wish to use neighbourhood planning for are equally telling. It is true that the most frequent answer was to designate locally valued green space for protection. However, it cannot be concluded that rural communities would typically like to use neighbourhood planning as a means to stop development taking place in their local area. In most cases protecting green space would be part of a package of allocations. Most respondents also said they would like to allocate development sites for affordable housing and for community facilities, while between forty and fifty per cent were keen to allocate sites for employment uses and market housing. It is worth adding that this message still holds true for the smallest rural communities, even if to a slightly lesser extent; they too say they would like to use neighbourhood planning for a package of measures (and not only to protect local green space).

Four issues which the Department for Communities & Local Government could helpfully clarify in a statement are:

- What neighbourhood planning can and cannot do where a Local Plan is already in place, so communities are clearer about its scope and any limitations;
- What the neighbourhood planning position is where no Local Plan yet exists i.e. there is no Local Plan to be in conformity with at that stage;
- What the transition process might be (if any) to develop or turn existing community-led plans into Neighbourhood Plans; and
- Although not specifically arising from this survey, what the relationship is between local council led neighbourhood planning and other community group led requests for Community Right to Build Orders or local green space designations.

This survey represents an early snapshot of views across rural England. However, it can be concluded that rural areas appear to be promising territory for the development of statutory neighbourhood planning, so long as the expectations about it are managed and there is sufficient support made available for local councils and communities to take part.

⁷ In October 2011 it announced there would be £50 million of support for neighbourhood planning up to 2015.

⁸ In particular, from the county-based Rural Community Councils and using Defra funding.

Brian Wilson Associates

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brian@brianwilsonassociates.co.uk

020 8241 6343

rsnonline

RURAL SERVICES NETWORK

The **Rural Services Network** is a membership organisation devoted to safeguarding and improving services in rural communities across England. It comprises in its membership of some 250 organisations from Local authorities, other service providers (public, private and voluntary sector) and national bodies interested in issues affecting rural areas.